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ABSTRACT

Community service is the most neglected of academic functions, largely because involvement in community programs is less likely to be rewarding to the scholar than research and teaching activities. Community service activities must be regarded as intrinsic to the functions of an urban college, especially since these projects can, in turn, generate new opportunities for teaching and research. Communication scholars, perhaps more than any other group, can provide special service, inasmuch as communicative difficulties are inherent in many urban problems. One example is a 1971 community task force project that received assistance from the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee). Insights provided by involvement in such community service can assist educators in developing new and appropriate courses and research projects. (RN)

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COMMUNITY SERVICE AS GENERATIVE

by

Robert J. Doolittle

Paper presented to Urban Mission Caucus, Speech Communication Assn. Convention, Chicago, Illinois, December 27, 1972.

It is fair to say -- and hardly new -- that community service is the most neglected of academic functions. And this neglect is in the conventional wisdom both intentional and fully justified. Pierre van den Berghe, for example, does not mention community service in his delightfully cynical book entitled, Academic Gamesmanship or How to Make a Ph.D. Pay.[1] There is in his view no conceivable strategy by which community service can be used by scholars to gain promotions or pay increases, or to establish a professional reputation. Such cynicism about the value of community service as an instrument for garnering academic rewards is, of course, widely shared. Most scholars regard community as a seductive trap. While attractive possiblities for community service involvements are recognized and while administrators appear to encourage such involvements, the dangers are all too evident. Involvements in community service activities tend to be increasingly time-consuming. And, while community groups may occasionally express their gratitude,[2] departmental and divisional committees charged with evaluating academic performance seem only mildly interested. Consequently, most scholars concentrate their efforts upon research and teaching activities which are both more easily managed and more likely to be rewarded. Community service involvements are typically restricted to such "safe" activities as membership on various departmental and university committees -- membership on ad hoc committees is preferred -- and to participation in professional associations such as the Speech Communication Association.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest to this Action Caucus a different view of community service -- particularly community service in urban settings. I will argue the benefits of envisioning community service as an intrinsic and important function of urban-located departments of Speech or Communication both as a way of giving meaning to statements of "urban mission" and as a means of generating teaching and research opportunities.

I make no claim to being expert in analyzing and predicting the ways urban universities will adapt what they do to meet the demands of an increasingly urban society. I do, however, detect evidences that universities and particularly urban universities are being called upon to become directly involved in remedying societal ills. Lunsford is representative of a number of observers when he writes:

> University functions...are widely acknowledged to be of increasing importance to the rest of society. . . . The economic growth of a society and the economic opportunities equally depend on these functions today, even in the short run. In non-economic terms, the survival of the historical perspective and traditions of free thought and criticism are also largely dependent on universities' activities. Thus the day of the university's isolation as an "ivory tower" probably is gone forever. Intensive interaction with the outside world is now inescapable.[3]

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At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UW-M) heavy emphasis has been laid -- especially in the past ten years -- upon the articulation and implementation of an "urban mission" which will "move (the university) along new lines -- to experiment, to generate and try out original ideas and approaches in instruction, research and public service."[4] From the viewpoints of legislators, regents, and various planning committees -- including the prestigious and influential Coordinating Council for Higher Education in Wisconsin -- the unique mission of UW-M was to be defined by the opportunities and special responsibilities consequent upon its location in the Milwaukee Metropolitan area.[5] This emphasis, I believe, quite clearly demands that community service should be regarded as a function co-equal in importance to the more familiar functions of teaching and research. I believe, too, that emphasis upon an "urban mission" necessarily implies an interdependent relationship among the functions of teaching, research, and community service which is frequently misunderstood. If the term, "urban mission" has meaning, I believe it is that teaching and research activities should, in addition to fulfilling general educational aims, increase understanding of the urban environment and improve the quality of urban life. Community service activities, in this same view, should serve to generate opportunities for research and learning which extend beyond the classroom and laboratory and relate directly to the exigencies of urban life. If such is the case, community service activities can no longer be regarded as peripheral; they must be seen as intrinsic to the proper and full functioning of the urban university.

There are, of course, no guarantees that the reward systems in urban universities will shift to accomodate the new emphases suggested by an "urban mission." The chairman of the powerful University Committee for the University of Wisconsin system recently commented publicly that he knew of no departmental or divisional committee which accorded community service equal or even significant weight in determining promotions. Research and publication and evidence of excellence in teaching will continue to describe the order of priorities for determining promotions and merit pay increases. This reality and the equally evident reality of pressures to articulate and implement an "urban mission" dictate a closer examination of community service activities viewed as a means of generating teaching and research opportunities.

Communication scholars, perhaps more than any other group, can identify ways to use community service activities to generate teaching and research opportunities by examining some of the more evident communicative problems associated with urban living. A comprehensive examination of communicative problems in urban areas is not possible nor intended here.[6] I intend, rather, to describe a recent experience illustrating some communicative problems experienced by urban residents and a number of possibilities for using community service as a means of generating teaching and research opportunities.

In Spring, 1971, I participated by invitation in a community task force organized by the Milwaukee United Fund agency whose purpose was to develop a community-wide information and referral service for residents needing health and welfare services. Two major communicative problems were evident from the outset. First, health and welfare agencies in Milwaukee lacked any means for coordinating their efforts. Because no central coordinating agency existed to promote inter-agency communication, agencies frequently duplicated effort and, occasionally, worked at cross-purposes. Secondly, residents of the area were confronted by a bewildering assortment of highly specialized agencies with different capacities and eligibility requirements. Residents often did not know where to turn for help when they needed it, or they made inappropriate use of various agencies. A local mental health agency specializing in family counseling, for example, frequently

received calls from individuals needing housing assistance. Finding the appropriate agency to respond to a specific need required more information than was available to most residents. Evidence existed, too, that residents were not aware of how to obtain emergency assistance particularly after business hours or on weekends, even though facilities exist for providing emergency health and welfare assistance. These problems are particularly familiar to urban areas where density and role specialization result in the creation of specialized formal and informal channels of communication and where greater effort is required to coordinate specialized and independently operating services.

The task force studied these problems for more than six months before proposing a central information and referral agency offering free information and referral services to Milwaukee area residents on a 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week basis.[7] The system as proposed will operate through a well-advertised telephone system and a series of interconnected outreach stations in key locations. A computer-assisted coordinating mechanism tied to more than three hundred local health and welfare agencies -- both public and private -- is central to the proposal. Currently, the proposal is before the Milwaukee County Board for approval. Funding for the service will be generated through a purchase-of-service arrangement that will require no expenditures of local tax funds. The current estimates are that the service will pay for itself through savings resulting from coordination of agency efforts.

In addition to the value of otherwise unavailable insights into the communicative features of Milwaukee's health and welfare establishment -- insights which I find useful in teaching an upper-division class -- a number of benefits derived from this experience. First, my participation in the task force resulted in an invitation to participate in teaching communication skills to information and referral specialists and volunteers. Classes in interpersonal relations, interviewing, telephone use, and other communication skills will be conducted on a regular basis for hired staff and volunteers through the University of Wisconsin-Extension Division using the facilities of the UW-M Civic Center Campus. Secondly, several research opportunities resulted from this community service involvement. Research directed at analysis of the effectiveness of various efforts to make residents of the area aware of the purpose and availability of the service is an apparent and continuing need. Computer data which will indicate the number of calls received from seven pre-determined areas each month will provide a base measurement of some value. Analysis of the effectiveness of various messages and various formal and informal communicative channels is needed and welcomed. Other opportunities exist for examining the effectiveness of intra-agency and inter-agency communication systems and for analyzing the interpersonal communication between information and referral specialists and various ethnic and racial client groups. Importantly, these teaching and research opportunities derived directly from participation in a community service activity. Without such participation, access to teaching opportunities and research possibilities would be problematic. Community groups tend to resent and resist the "interference" of researchers whose commitment to community problems continues only as long as their research projects. Entry to community teaching and research opportunities is often "purchased" through community service involvement.

Other examples might be cited but perhaps the point is made: community service activities represent possibilities for generating teaching and research opportunities. Unlike more familiar teaching and research activities, community

service activities involve faculty with different clients and different settings. And the experience gained may be valuable. As urban universities are forced by increasing enrollments and limited space to de-centralize their instructional and research activities, insights provided by community service involvements may be useful in determining what kinds of instruction and research are appropriate for various locations. Finally, the value of community service for generating insights useful in teaching urban students should not be underestimated.[8] Most students in urban universities are and expect to remain urban residents. They are increasingly demanding that their education should be appropriate to their needs as urbanites. Where possible, instructors should relate instruction to the setting which is familiar to these students, and as far as possible students should be involved with their instructors in community service activities and the teaching and research activities which result.

Unless community service is envisioned as generative of teaching and research opportunities, it will continue to be regarded as a seductive trap, and pressures to articulate and implement "urban mission" will continue to create anxiety and confusion. Reward systems in urban universities -- as elsewhere -- can be expected to lag somewhere behind current reality and necessity. But, if the history of American universities is any indication, rewards will follow innovations which answer real needs and produce new and promising directions. In the short run, the risks of accepting community service involvements may be made more palatable if they are publicly supported by colleagues and professional groups who understand the value of community service for generating meaningful teaching and research opportunities.

NOTES

1. Pierre van den Berghe, Academic Gamesmanship (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1970).

2. Occasionally, of course, community groups express outright hostility and appear to resent and oppose as inappropriate and unwelcome the intervention of scholars in community affairs. When community service activities are met by such opposition and hostility, it tends to reinforce the feelings of most scholars that community service activities are unmanageable and non-rewarding at best and dangerous at worst. The view here is that these risks may have to be accepted as the price of implementing a meaningful "urban mission."

3. Terry F. Lunsford, "Some Suggested Directions for Research," in The State of the University, Carlos E. Kruytbosch and Sheldon L. Messinger (eds.) (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1970) p. 325, emphasis mine.

4. Quotation from Fred Harvey Harrington, president of the University of Wisconsin, in laying down guidelines for the autonomous development of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Cited in J. Martin Klotsche, The Urban University (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 30, emphasis mine.

5. J. Martin Klotsche, The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee: An Urban University (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1972) p. 58.

6. The initiation of such a review might begin with two particularly useful sources: Eugene F. Shaw, "Urbanism as a Communication Variable," unpublished paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism Convention, Berkeley, California (August, 1969); and Richard L. Meir, A Communications Theory of Urban Growth (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1970).

7. Centralized Information and Referral, A proposal submitted by INFORMATION CENTRAL, INCORPORATED to the Milwaukee County Department of Public Welfare, (August, 1972) unpublished mimeo.

8. J. Martin Klotsche, The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee: An Urban University p. 86f.